
MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor C. Ray Nagin and his administration
FROM: Mirthala Santizo
SUBJECT: Public Administration Assessment Case Study: Hurricane Katrina: A Man-Made Crisis?
DATE: 12/4/2007

Summary: When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in the summer of 2005, it was not the first natural disaster to hit the region, but the physical, social, economical and administrative damages it caused still affects the city today. New Orleans was built in the early 1700s and settlers felt that the area was a prime trade location due to its proximity to the sea. The first chief engineer felt that the location was an inappropriate place to build a city due to the fact that it was prone to flooding. Against the first chief engineer's warnings, the city was built with levees around the river to "fix" the problem. When the levees failed, administrators fixed that problem by building spillways and reservoirs. One natural disaster after another continued to destroy the city and administrators continued to just patch up the levee systems instead of making policy changes. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina put the government's ability to react quickly to the test and unfortunately, many New Orleans residents suffered the consequence.

Issues and Recommendation:

Communication problems between government agencies: One of the biggest public administrative downfalls of the Hurricane Katrina disaster is that each level of the government failed to adequately communicate and cooperate with each other to ensure that the citizens of New Orleans would receive the aid they needed. Warnings of the category 4-type hurricane came 56 hours before it actually hit and that is when the evacuation plan should have been ordered. The order would have enabled the government agencies to act quicker and evacuate people out of New Orleans faster. According to Woodrow Wilson (1887), government agencies can only work well together if they cooperate. The federal, state and city governments can only be strong by collaborating and assisting each other (Wilson, 1887). To ensure that the communication problem does not reoccur, several steps of building a network should be taken. The first step is determining the actors'

and agencies' roles (Patton and Sawicki, 1993). By determining the roles, the government at each level will not face the problem of "fuzzy boundaries" where they do not know what their responsibilities are (Kettl, 2002). Second, the city of New Orleans, along with the state and federal government, needs to create a partnership that specifies exactly how the actors and agencies will help each other during hurricane and flooding season. Since New Orleans and the surrounding regions are prone to extreme flooding, an action plan should be created for each hurricane category. Third, there should be a point of contact within each agency so that administrators are not doing the same tasks and therefore, inefficiency will be decreased (Patton and Sawicki, 1993). Once it is confirmed that a hurricane is approaching, a point person at the local level should be in constant communication with a point person in each government agency (State of Louisiana Governor's Office, Department of Defense, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Department of Homeland Security, etc.). Fourth, networking and cooperation can be improved by creating a policy structure between the points of contact. The virtual structure will serve as a mainframe and also, be the structure for policy changes. Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) claimed that building an effective governance structure will allow for efficient knowledge sharing and planning between networks. Although there were communication failures between government agencies, it does not mean that it cannot be fixed. Creating and implementing network plans would allow for the government agencies to seamlessly work together.

Implementing new policy and infrastructure changes: The other issue present is the city's continuation of the levee-only policy or other policies that support levees. Ever since the policy began in 1815, New Orleans has had flooding problems because levees continued overflow or just break.

There are many reasons why the levee-only or levee-focused policies still exist and alternatives have not been implemented. The first reason is because groupthink continues to occur within administrators. Groupthink is "the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive in-group" and it results in "overrid[ing] realistic appraisal of alternative course of action" (Janis, 1971, pp.416-417). Every time the idea of changing the levee-only policy occurs, many people have convinced the opposing administration to not change it. Groupthink mentality can be avoided by allowing city and state government

administrators to express their policy concerns and to have an open mind to new ideas (Bowditch and Buono, 2005). If network and communication problems are addressed, it can create a safe atmosphere for individuals to state their concerns and opinions. Compromising and creating hybrid-policies is also another way to avoid groupthink (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004). With the new network, changing policies can be achieved.

The second reason policy change has not occurred is due to lack of funding. Implementing a significant policy change is extremely expensive and can seem to be unreachable. However, the short term expense can save the city and state from encountering more expenses and social problems in the future. A way to address the budgetary problems is by conducting incremental change over nonincremental change. Incremental change is where a new plan or policy is eased into the political, social and economic market, while nonincremental change is implementing an entire program all at once (Patton and Sawicki, 1993). By conducting incremental change, then the expenses of the policy change can be extended over many years. Another way to get the necessary funding is to diversify their revenues beyond general funds. Revenues can be increased in many ways such as increasing tourist taxes, selling bonds, applying for government grants, partnering with private companies and nonprofits, etc (Johnson, 1996). Performing a cost-benefit analysis of each viable approach can be a good way to determine what will be best for the New Orleans (Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman, 2004). Policy change can be expensive and politically difficult, but history has shown that continuing with levee-only concentrated policies would just exacerbate the flooding problems of New Orleans.

Conclusion: New Orleans had many administration problems when Hurricane Katrina hit, such as lack of communication and resistance to policy change. Starting at the city level, administrative changes can be made. Creating networks and designating point of contacts is a way to bridge the communication gap. Eliminating groupthink will alleviate resistance to policy change. Planning incremental change and diversifying funding will allow changes to levee-only policies. By creating government networks and making changes to policies, New Orleans can be better prepared to cope with natural disasters. As Woodrow Wilson (1887) declared, the government agencies should be strong independently, but also “interdependent and co-operative (p. 221).”

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